

at her own front gate, "I have something to say to you."

"But I'm in such a hurry, John," she said. She was poised for flight.

"I don't mean now," John said. "I mean this evening."

"But I believe I have an engagement this evening, Mr. Anderson"—She raised her eyebrows expressively. In a flash she had assumed that air of hers. In one breathless instant she ceased to be the friendly, jolly girl John had known and became the person who seemed to say, "Come and take me—if you can."

"So good of you to take me home," she finished, and before John could recover himself she had waved her hand and started up the walk.

For an instant John watched her receding back. Involuntarily he clenched his fists. And then he ran after her. Mabel heard him coming. Mabel gave one quick look over her shoulder and fled. She ran fast; but once started, John Palmer ran faster. He caught her at the top step. He held her tightly in his arms.

"You will, will you?" he said roughly, and kissed her mouth.

"I—I," Mabel gasped. She tried to free herself. John held her closer. Mabel looked at him defiantly.

"You brute!" she said passionately.

"You're going to marry me," he said through his teeth. Mabel looked up at him. And then her head sank on his shoulder and, with a little sigh, she relaxed in his arms.

"You're going to marry me," he repeated.

"Yes," she whispered, so low that he scarcely heard her.

John released her. John raised his hat. With more ease than he had known himself to possess, he bowed to Mabel.

"Until this evening," he said calmly, and walked off. He had walked right past his car, standing at the curb, the engine running, without seeing it or thinking of it. His self-possession wasn't as magnificent as he imagined. But he had won Mabel Durbrow.

They were married in less than a month and went to the Canadian Rockies for their honeymoon, and stayed twice as long as they had planned. When they came back to Scarborough everybody looked at them searchingly and decided that Mabel was quite as much in love with John as he was with her.

"Of course," said Harvey Woods, "it is well known that a reformed flirt makes the most devoted wife."

Other members of the younger crowd were impressed with this piece of wisdom, so much impressed that they repeated it as their own.

The remark became popular, was overdone, lost its savor, was forgotten. About that time the more observing began to raise their eyebrows and exchange glances over the conduct of Mabel Palmer.

"Of course," said Harvey Woods, "once a flirt, always a flirt—look at Mabel Palmer."

Everybody looked; everybody saw; everybody shook his head wisely and repeated what Harvey Woods had said: "Of course, once a flirt"—

II.

BUT if everybody understood what had happened, John Palmer did not. John Palmer did not understand it at all. He didn't know just how he had won Mabel. But he had won her. He knew that. She had been his—completely. And now she wasn't.

She hadn't done anything that he could reasonably complain about—nothing to which he could definitely object.

John Palmer sat in front of the library fire, considering. It was a spring night and the fire was smoldering fitfully against the back-log, a low fire, but one that ate steadily into the heart of the wood. John Palmer's thoughts were like that. . . .

He imagined himself discussing the matter with Mabel. He never had discussed it with Mabel. He never would discuss it with Mabel. But supposing he did? She could hardly deny that she had been flirting with Arthur Millingham. But she could certainly assert that it was nothing. And it probably was nothing. What could he say then? He could say she was attractive—attention—that she was exciting gossip. But was she?

John Palmer went round this circle of thinking about seven times in an hour. And then he realized that it wasn't Mabel's flirting that he objected to so much. It was her attitude toward him. She had come to treat him as if he were a piece of furniture—a mantel, say, to lean on occasionally. But he couldn't very well tell Mabel that. Besides, if she were treating him the way she had treated him when they were first married she wouldn't be flirting with Arthur Millingham. So it was her flirting that he objected to—in a manner of speaking.

John Palmer had gone round this circle about four times when he heard the doorbell ring somewhere in the depths of the house. He sat up suddenly, saw that it was after 10 o'clock and answered the bell himself.

It was Mabel's father. John was considerably surprised to receive a call from Mr. Durbrow at this hour, but he did not betray his surprise. He led the way back to the library and got out some cigars of the kind Mr. Durbrow liked and stirred up the fire. There is nothing like a wood fire to cover an embarrassing moment—unless it is the ritual of lighting a really excellent cigar. . . .

"Where's Mabel?" asked Mr. Durbrow.

The question was a natural one for

Mr. Durbrow knew that John Palmer was a singularly truthful man. He saw clearly that John hadn't the least idea where Mabel was at that moment. He couldn't say where she was, and he wouldn't lie about it, and so he said just that—"Not absolutely."

"John," said Mr. Durbrow firmly. He intended to carry this thing through now that he had started it. "John," Mr. Durbrow repeated more firmly, "I must beg your pardon. You know—well, to be brutally frank"—Mr. Durbrow hesitated. "To be frank," he resumed, "to be quite brutally frank—why, John, we're old friends, aren't we?"

John Palmer nodded and, seizing the tongs, he turned the back-log half round. He did not speak. He just turned the back-log a bit.

Mr. Durbrow saw that John was embarrassed. John Palmer was a singularly honorable man. But he was not a man to whom frankness came easily—as it came to Mr. Durbrow. And slowly, minutely examining his cigar, Mr. Durbrow saw that he would have to encourage John, to show John how to be frank. Mr. Durbrow saw that John had an immense need to be frank. A double need. He needed to be frank with himself, instead of continuing to hide the hurt he had already hid too long. He needed to be frank with Mabel. It

Somehow, in spite of his frankness, they seemed to be talking around the point rather than to it. But how the devil could they do anything else?

"You know, John," said Mr. Durbrow desperately, "I feel that Mabel is—well—almost indiscreet."

John Palmer sat down in his chair close to the fire and reached for the tongs.

"I should hardly go as far as that," he said.

"I should," Mr. Durbrow insisted.

THERE was a long silence, while John poked the fire and Mr. Durbrow puffed his cigar.

"The fact is, John," Mr. Durbrow continued, "The fact is, I believe I'd speak to her about it—if I were you."

"What would you say?"

"I'd be quite frank," said Mr. Durbrow. "I'd speak to her just as frankly as we've been speaking to-night."

"H-m-m-m!" said John.

"I would," said Mr. Durbrow. "I'd be very gentle, of course—sort of light, you know."

"How light?" John asked.

"Why," said Mr. Durbrow testily, "I'd say: 'Look here, my dear, aren't you flirting a bit?' Just like that—lightly but frank."

John shook his head.

"I would," Mr. Durbrow said. "I certainly would."

"You see, Mr. Durbrow," John said slowly, "I'm no Turk. A woman has as much right to her own way after marriage as before. Perhaps more. If Mabel likes to flirt a bit—why that's Mabel's affair. I can't forbid her to flirt. And what good would it do me if I did?"

"H-m-m-m!" said Mr. Durbrow.

Involuntarily, John Palmer clenched his fists.

"I happen to be stronger than Mabel," he said. "But I can't use my physical strength!"

"Of course not," Mr. Durbrow said hastily. "That would be fatal. She would hate you. Besides no man can do that. It isn't done. But you could suggest a preference to her."

John smiled at Mr. Durbrow.

"You mean—suggest a preference for her society?"

"Well, John, after all—you're her husband."

"Yes. That's just why I can't say: 'Mabel, I'd like to have dinner with you myself occasionally.' You see that was the implication when I married her. And if she doesn't choose to dine with me it's just her way of saying that she'd rather dine elsewhere."

Mr. Durbrow frowned more deeply than ever.

"John," he asked, "why couldn't you have a talk with Mabel—just such a frank talk as we've been having—without any reserves on either side?"

John Palmer rose and paced back and forth across the room. Mr. Durbrow saw that he was seriously considering this plan. But he saw also how difficult it was for a sensitive boy like John to face the prospect of absolute frankness, such frankness as he, Mr. Durbrow, had grown used to through long practice of it.

He rose and put his hand on John Palmer's shoulder.

"My boy," he said. "You don't know women. You don't understand women. I do. Women are difficult to manage. But they can't beat frankness. They like to be elusive and evasive. That's their game. But they can't play it if you're frank. Try being frank with Mabel."

"I will try it," said John Palmer. "I'll talk to Mabel to-night."

Mr. Durbrow held out his hand.

"Good!" he said.

They shook hands.

"I know Mabel," Mr. Durbrow said.

"After all, she's my daughter."

"Of course," said John Palmer.

"You can be gentle with her—you must be gentle. But at the same time you can be frank."

"Of course," said John Palmer.

"Just a little frankness," said Mr. Durbrow.

They shook hands again at the door.

III.

JOHAN PALMER sat for a long hour after Mr. Durbrow had gone, sat in front of his fire until long after midnight. He sat there thinking how lovely Mabel



"YOU WILL, WILL YOU?" HE SAID ROUGHLY, AND KISSED HER MOUTH.

a father to ask of a son-in-law. Or it should have been. But John Palmer turned the back-log over for the second time, and Mr. Durbrow examined the wrapper of his cigar, which he had already scrutinized elaborately.

"I'm sorry she isn't at home," John said. "I know she'd be glad to see you."

"H-m-m-m," said Mr. Durbrow.

"I believe she's dining at the Country Club," John continued.

Mr. Durbrow frowned. Mr. Durbrow bit deeply into his cigar.

"Don't you know where she is, John?"

John winced, winced visibly. Mr. Durbrow would have withdrawn that question if he could. He hadn't intended to ask a question so bald. But he had asked it. If he apologized for asking it, he would only make it worse. That is often the trouble when one has said the wrong thing.

"Not absolutely," John said.

was up to Mr. Durbrow to lead the way.

"I'm fond of Mabel," Mr. Durbrow said. "And I—I'm fond of you, John. I want to help you—only I don't know just what to say."

"I know," said John Palmer.

"I hope, John," said Mr. Durbrow, "that you don't mind my discussing everything awfully frankly—this way."

"No," said John. He shifted the back-log a quarter turn. "Not at all."

"I was sure you wouldn't," said Mr. Durbrow.

John Palmer rose and paced back and forth across the room.

Mr. Durbrow rose and paced back and forth the other way.

"John," said Mr. Durbrow.

"Yes," said John.

"Things—you know—things can't go on this way, can they?"

John shook his head.

Mr. Durbrow sat down. Mr. Durbrow knitted his brows in thought.